THE FOLK-PAINTINGS OF MITHILĀ

BY

Daya Shankar Upadhyaya

The history of arts and crafts of Bihar goes back to the hoary past. In the Vedic and Upanishadic period, the oldest part of this state was known as Videha country, comprising modern Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga districts of North Bihar and its capital was Mithilā. This Videha was the centre of cultural re-generation. The name of the Mithilā is constantly referred to in the Epics and Jātakas. In Gupta records Mithilā is collectively known as Tīrabhukti[1] (Tirhut). This region was the centre of many types of arts and crafts.

The history of Indian folk-art begins from the dawn of the civilisation. Dr. Coomaraswamy[2] has rightly remarked that the folk arts (that survived in Bengal) are directly descended from the arts prevailing 5000 years ago. The folk-art is the symbol of the collective forces of society. These arts have a pattern of their own, which within a rigid circumstances laid down by a hoary tradition has attained a perfection. From this art a great deal of Hindu pantheon have been brought to light and the absorption of folk symbols and beliefs. The rural art was motivated by utilitarian and ritualistic features and sometimes by individual creative and recreational impulses. But this art is mainly dominated and shaped by the religious motif, which is of universal nature. According to S. K. Ray,[3] "the relation between art and religion is a universal feature. And in the religion of Brata, art is indispensable means of communication between the devotees and Gods". Thus, the Brata[4] or festival somehow or other is a main dominating factor of origin of folk-arts. Hence, Mr. Herbert Read[5] has rightly remarked that the folk-art is a peasant art. The

---

1 *ASR*, 1903—4, p. 88.

2 *The Bratas of Bengal*, Introduction, p. V.

3 *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. IV.

4 *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. IV.—' The Bratas which directly or indirectly gave rise to the beginning of folk traditions of art now surviving in Bengal, naturally can explain the reasons for which began to draw paintings and model sculptures".

5 *The Meaning of Art.* p 64. "The art of simple, unsophisticated people, generally known as peasant art......It is the art that springs from a sophisticated love of simplicity and simple life".

folk-art can be classified into four categories, i. e. (i) Aṅkika (अंकिक), (ii) Vācika (वाचिक), (iii) Nirmita (निर्मित) and (iv) Abhineya (अभिनेय)

In the first category, i. e. in Aṅkika, the folk-painting (Bhitti-citra, Alpana etc.) has got much importance. This folk-painting is prevalent in North Bihar and especially in Mithilā region. The Sanskrit, Buddhist and Jain works have referred to the painting (citra) as one of the prominent art of the sixty-four traditional arts (kalā) of India.

The Sanskrit word "citra" is generally used for painting. The "Viṣṇuddharmottara"[6] refers to citra, the painting as the finest of fine arts. We can get all kinds of merit accruing from Artha, Dharma, Kāma, Mokṣa. According to 'Samrāṅgana-Sutra-dhārā',[7] the painting is supreme among all arts. The 'citra' is a wonder and it is through this wonder that one can conceive of the Saṁsāra. If there is no wonder, and knowledge drawn, it leads to the emancipation, the Mokṣa (i. e., the release from this Saṁsāra) which is nothing but full of sufferings. The great Sanskrit work 'Aparājita-Pṛccha"[8] (as quoted in citra-lakṣaṇa) refers that all this three-fold world, the complete universe, both animate and inanimate has arisen from the root of citra. It further relates that all of the 84 lacs of Jivayonīs are an outcome of the miracle of the citra.

Thus, the citra has got its own importance in Indian culture, and it expresses and communicates the man's deepest instincts and emotions reconciled and integrated with social experience and cluture.

Generally the painting is done either by the folk artists or by classical artists in three ways.

1. Wall-painting (Bhitti-citra),
2. Canvas-painting (Paṭa-citra), and
3. Floor-painting (Bhumī-Śobhā or Alpanā).

In Northern region of Bihar, the first and third type of paintings are very popular in folk-women. The tradition of the decoration of the walls and ceilings is very ancient one. The famous fresco paintings of Ajantā and

6 *Citra-lakṣaṇa*, p. 4—
कलानां प्रवरं चित्रं धर्मकामर्थमोक्षदम् ।
मङ्गल्यं प्रथमं चै तद्गृहे यत्र प्रतिष्ठितम् ॥

7 *Samrāṅgaṇa-Sutradhāra*, p. 71—
चित्रं हि सर्वशिल्पानां मुखं लोकस्य च प्रियम् ॥

8 *Aparājita-Pṛccha*, p. 224—
चित्रमूलोद्भवं सर्वं त्रैलोक्य सचराचरम् ।
चित्रमूलोद्भवं सर्वं जगतत्स्थावरजङ्गमम् ॥

Bāgha are burning examples of it. But this tradition is carried on in the folk regions of India and particularly of Bihar. The village women decorate the walls of their houses (outer and inner walls) with different citras during the auspicious days (like vivāha and upanayana etc.) or festivals (like Dipāvalī, Dasharā etc.) or on the occasion of bratas.[9]

In Bhojpurī speaking area of this state the word 'Urehanā' (उरेहना) has been used for making Bhitti-citra[10] and in Mithilā region "Bhitti-Śobhā" or "kohabara-likhanā" is applied for it. In Bhojpurī area this painting is done by the village people, male or female, who are 'Mālī' by caste. But in Mithilā region generally such painting is drawn by the folk-women.[11]

The wall painting is usually prevalent in almost all the regions of Bihar with certain modifications. As already stated above, this type of painting is done on auspicious occasions, particularly at the time of vivāha (marriage). This type of painting is generally drawn on the outer and inner walls[12] of the Kohabara (the room for new bride and bride-groom). But in the land of Janaka, the folk-women usually make paintings on the three places i. e. "The Gosaunī-ghara (room for Kula-Devī), the Kohabara-ghara (honeymoon room for newly married couple), Kohabara-gharaka-koniyā (corridor or out side kohabara ghara).

The practice to decorate the walls of kohabara-ghara by the females

9 *The Bratachari Synthesis* (Calcutta, 1940), p. 1—"The Brata signifies a solemn or sacred purpose, ideal or objective which is pursued as joyous rhythmic ritual......and is also used to signify the combined joyous integrated ritual itself".

10 In Rajasthan area the word "citrāvaṇa" (चित्रावण) is used for (a) 'Bhitti-citra.' or "Khyāla Māṇḍana (ख्याल माण्डन)".—*Sammelana-Patrikā*, V. S. 2010, p. 400.

(b) In Western U. P. this 'bhitti-citra' is named as "Thāpā" (थापा)—*Sammelana-Patrikā*, V. S. 2010, p. 303

11 In Rajasthan such painting is drawn by professional people locally known as Chitaira (चितेर).—*Sammelana-Patrikā*, V. S. 2010., p. 400.

12 *Folk Paintings of India*, p. 3. "Folk paintings depends, of course, to some extent on the availability of appropriate materials. In U. P. the smoot whitewashed walls have provided a large canvas. In the Saera hills of Orissa the walls are washed with red clay; and the paintings therefore a e done on this in white and black. In Assam, however, the walls of the village houses are genrally of cane and bamboo. So wall painting is not found there, instead a tradition of painting on pitch, came into being; and unlike medium which has most unexpectedly attractive result."

is very ancient one. From the study of the Bāṇa's "Harṣacarita",[13] we learn that in the kohabara-ghara of Grahavarmā (brother-in-law of Harṣa), the figure of gods were painted by the women. Bāṇa[14] has further described that on the gate of the outer walls of the Vāsagriha (inner apartment) of Grahavarmā, the figure of Kāmadeva and his consorts Ratī and Priti were painted. Similar to the above descriptions we also find the references to such paintings in folk-lores of Bihar.

In a Maithilī folk-lore[15] we find the description about painting of Kohabara-ghara by Kausilyā Ranī, Sumitrā, and Kaikayī, the three wives of king Daśaratha. Kaikayī painted the bunch of mango fruits on the wall of Kohabara-ghara. In another Maithilī folk-song[16] we have a description that after completing the marriage ceremony Rāma went to kohabara-ghara along with his consort Sītā. If we study Bhojpurī folk-lore there are numerous references to the paintings of kohabara-ghara. From one folk-song we learn that Sarahaja (wife of brother-in-law) is going to paint the honey-moon room (kohabara) with figure of bamboos (Bānsa), lotus leaves (locally called Puraina) and the motifs of auspicious signs (Māṅgalika-chinha or Suhāga). In another Bhojpurī folk-song[18] it is

13 *Harṣacarita, Sāṅskṛitika Adhayana*, p. 83.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

15 *Maithilī-Lokagīta*, Song No. 14, p. 145—
कोवर (कोहवर) लिखल कोशिला रानी; अओर सुमित्रा रानी हे ।
आम के घौद लिखल केकइया रानी,
बड़रे यतन समे हे,
ताहि कोबर (कोहवर) सुतलन्हि कोन दुल्हा,
संगे कन्या सुदेव हे ॥

16 *Maithilī Lokagita*, Song No. 4. p. 122.
भेल विवाह चलल राम कोवर (कोहबर),
संगे लै अंगुरि धरावि यो ॥

17 *Bhojpurī Gramgīta*, Song No. 239, p.135—
कोहबर लिखन चलली सरहजीया,
हो माथे गुलाल मुख पान ए।
(ऐसन) औसल कोहबर लिखली सरहजीया,
हो जाहि देखी नैना जुड़ाई ए।
आरी पारी लीखली सरहज बाँस पुरईन,
बीचे-बीचे लिखीह (लीखली) सोहाग ए ॥

18 Bhojpurī Gramagīta, Song No. 242. p. 136—
रगरी छिपा भरी चन्दन कोहबर लिखबी ए,
ताहि कोहबर सुतेला कवन दुल्हा जेवरी कवनी सुहवा ए ॥

described that a lady is going to paint the kohabara-ghara by sandlewood paste. In a third folk-lore[19] we have a description for drawing figure of four birds and one pair of goose on the walls of kohabara-ghara. The fourth song[20] refers to the figures of God, Sun and Moon. Thus the practice to decorate the kohabara-ghara with paintings is primary thing for the folk-women of Mithilā region.

These wall-paintings of Mithilā region has a numerous colour schemes, which were introduced by the folk-artisans. Gardener[21] has rightly remarked (about the colour-scheme) that "The colour is probably the most emotive of the elements. It is both a scientific element and an element of organisation. Scientifically, a colour is a wave of light perceived by means of sensation which it arouses in the eye". The Viṣṇudharmottara (chapters 27 and 40) the famous treatise on painting, gives two sets of colour varieties. The first set consists of five primary colours—red, white, black, yellow and green and the second one is white, yellow, black, blue and colours of the myrobalam. 'Śilparatna', a later treatise, mentions white, red, yellow, root and Śyāma (dark, blue or black) as primary colours. But the colours which folk-artists of Mithilā have used are mostly of fast nature, and they are deep red, green, blue, black etc. Besides deep colours they have also applied light yellow, pink, lemon, etc. The colours which are used by folk-women come under categories of primary colours of citra-lakṣaṇa[22] (the Mūlaraṅga or the Śuddhavarṇas). The maximum variety of red colour has been used by the village folk. The 'Śilparatna'[23] gives three gradation of red—Sindūra for light red, Gairuka (mountain born), red (mineral-chalks) for a middle tint and lakṣa (lac), juice for deep colour. In these folk-paintings, we do not find any scheme of light and shade, but they are only two-dimentional having length and breadth. But the women of Bhojpurī speaking area, generally use lime (for white), vermilion (for red), haldī (or Haritāla for yellow), Kājal (for black), Garu (for grey) for decorating Kohabara-ghara. In one Bhojpurī[24] folk-lore, there is a description of the use of nine colours by folk-women in their kohabara paintings. In another folk song (of

19 "चारि चिरैया जोड़ी हंश रे ·· ··· ··· ।

20 कोहबर लिखवि चान रे सुरुजवा;
मँडवा लिखवि गोपीचन्द रे"

21 *Art Through the Ages*, p. 6.

22 *Citra-lakṣaṇa*, p. 36-39.

23 *Vatsu* Śāstra, Vol. II. p. 413.

24 आषा मिति लिखवो मै नवरंग कोहवर ॥

kohabara) rice-flour is referred to for drawing the different figurines in the room of the new couple.[25] In another folk-song,[26] we have a description of kājala used for kohabara paintings. In Mithilā region the colours were prepared by indigenous method at home such as black by thick deposit of smoke, yellow by mixing banana leaves and milk with lime, red from the juice of Kusuma flower, deep red by dissolving vermilion into the water, green from the leaves of the creepers etc. These different colours are mixed with goat's milk and gum etc. and applied with cotton or wool rugs or with thin bamboo brush or straw or of cotton threads. In another words it may be stated that the old women and the young maidens of the family use brushes made of clothes and tied on to a stick. They reinforce the lines and fill in the colours with it. Sometimes they apply the colours by the help of their fingers. But at present some of folk-women are using chemical colours for their decorative motifs (i. e. for wall paintings) and some are using ready-made brushes for the paintings.

In Mithilā region this Bhitti-cirta is practised by the folk-women of upper castes (Kulīna-families), such as Brāhmaṇa and Kāyasthas. The lower castes people i e. schedule caste and Backward class persons express their artistic sentiments and skill by utility articles. Some of these are prepared for use in festivities in upper class homes. The former is more prolific and important. Brāhmaṇas are supposed to be the leader of society as they are highly educated and sophisticated people, hence, in all the social activities, we find delicacy and refinement in them. The Kāyasthas are supposed to be the other caste of refined taste after the Brāhmaṇas in all spheres of life in this region. Naturally the folk-women of these two castes are superb and fine. Archer has rightly remarked that Brāhmin's (folk) paintings have a delicate meandering lines which encloses areas of brilliant colours (pink, green, yellow, lemon, blue, black, red etc.). But Kāyastha's paintings on the other hand employ only one or two colour, the black and sometimes dull blood red. They rely on strong lines enlivened with hatching and spotting and the figures often set in panels, are firmly ranged in long procession round the wall. Thus, in short, we can say that generally this 'Bhitti-citra' is painted in fast colours.

---

25 पिसहुँ पीठरवा हे सीता, लिखि लामी कोहबर ॥

26 *Bhojpuri Grāmagīta*, Song No. 17, p. 12—

तनी एक काजर लिखलो मै कोहबर।
शिव लिखलो मन लाई ए ॥

It has got only two dimensions, i. e. length and breadth. The colour composition and delicacy of Rekhās (lines) are superb. If we compare these wall paintings of Mithilā with the paintings of Jain-Āgama and Rajput-paintings, we will find a few similarities in between the two. In both the paintings, the eyes are stretched and elongated and pointed nose, narrow forehead. But in kohabara of Bhojpurī area there is lack of such qualities. Bhojpurī citra are plain and simple and devoid of ornamentations. The colour composition and lining are of ordinary nature.

So far the subject-matter of these kohabara paintings is concerned it is mainly related to the social (figures 4 & 5) and religious phenomena (figures 2, 3 & 6). Apparently these folk paintings[27] are related with Vedic and Paurāṇic Gods and Goddesses (with their vāhanas—vehicle). Some local dramatic scenes, human, birds, and animal motifs and with motifs of flora and fauna. According to Mukherjee[28] "the motifs of the designs include conventionalised flora and fauna, circles in series, spiral or curvilinear devices, series of short lines, foot-prints of fragmentary (imaginative) pictures illustrating legends and stories". Most of the kohabara citras have glimpses of environmental and natural life. The subject matter of kohabara paintings of Mithilā can be classified into three types i. e. religious, secular, and decorative.

The religious paintings of kohabara-ghara include the figure of composit Gods i. e. Śiva and Pāravatī, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu in all incarnatory forms, Durgā (figure 3), Kālī, Gaṇeśa or Vināyaka (fig. 6,) Śeṣa-Nāga or Sarpa or nāga,[29] Gaja-Lakṣmī, Kṛṣṇa with Gopīs (fig. 2) etc. These are drawn for their blessings to new couple. The folk artists paint these religious figures in honey-moon room because each one represents the different human sentiments and ideas. Śiva represents idea of welfare and time (Mahākāla) and his consort Pārvatī[30] symbolises the

27 *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, p. 70. "The animal symbol, placed beneath, is interpreted as carrying the human figure and is called the vehicle (vāhana). It is a duplcate representation of energy and character of God."

28 The March of India Vol. VII, No. 3, p. 49.

29 *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, p.63. "The important function of Nagas is that of "door guardian' (Dvārapāla) appears at the portals of Hindū and Buddhist shrines. In this role their proper attitude is one of the pious devotion.

30 *Vastu Sāstra*, Vol. 2, pp. 319-320. "Pārvatī or Gaurī represent the Anugraha form of energy (शक्ति) the Gaurī or Pārvatī and Śiva, the two primordial parents of the universe—"जगत पितरौ वन्दे पार्वती परमेश्वरौ" (Raghuvanśaṁ, canto,

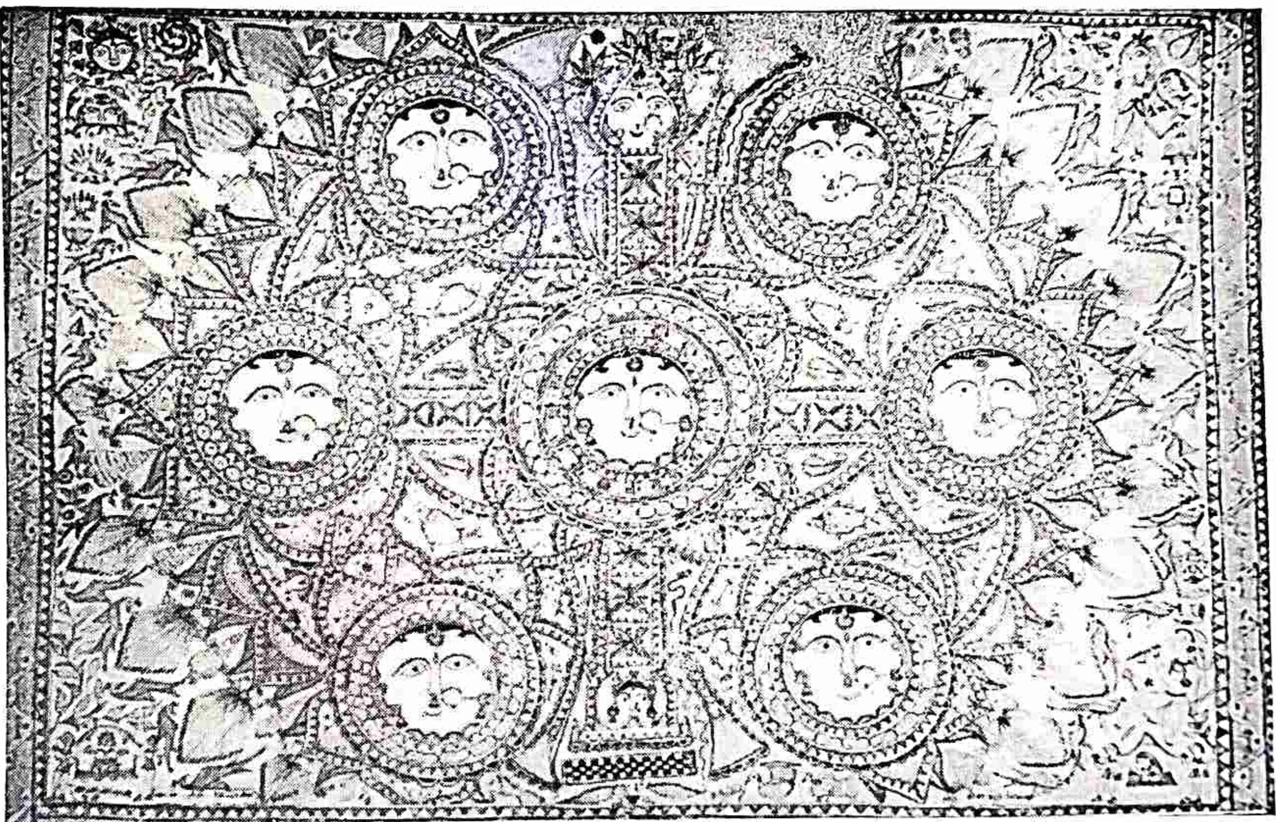


Fig. 1.
Citra of Kohabaraghara.

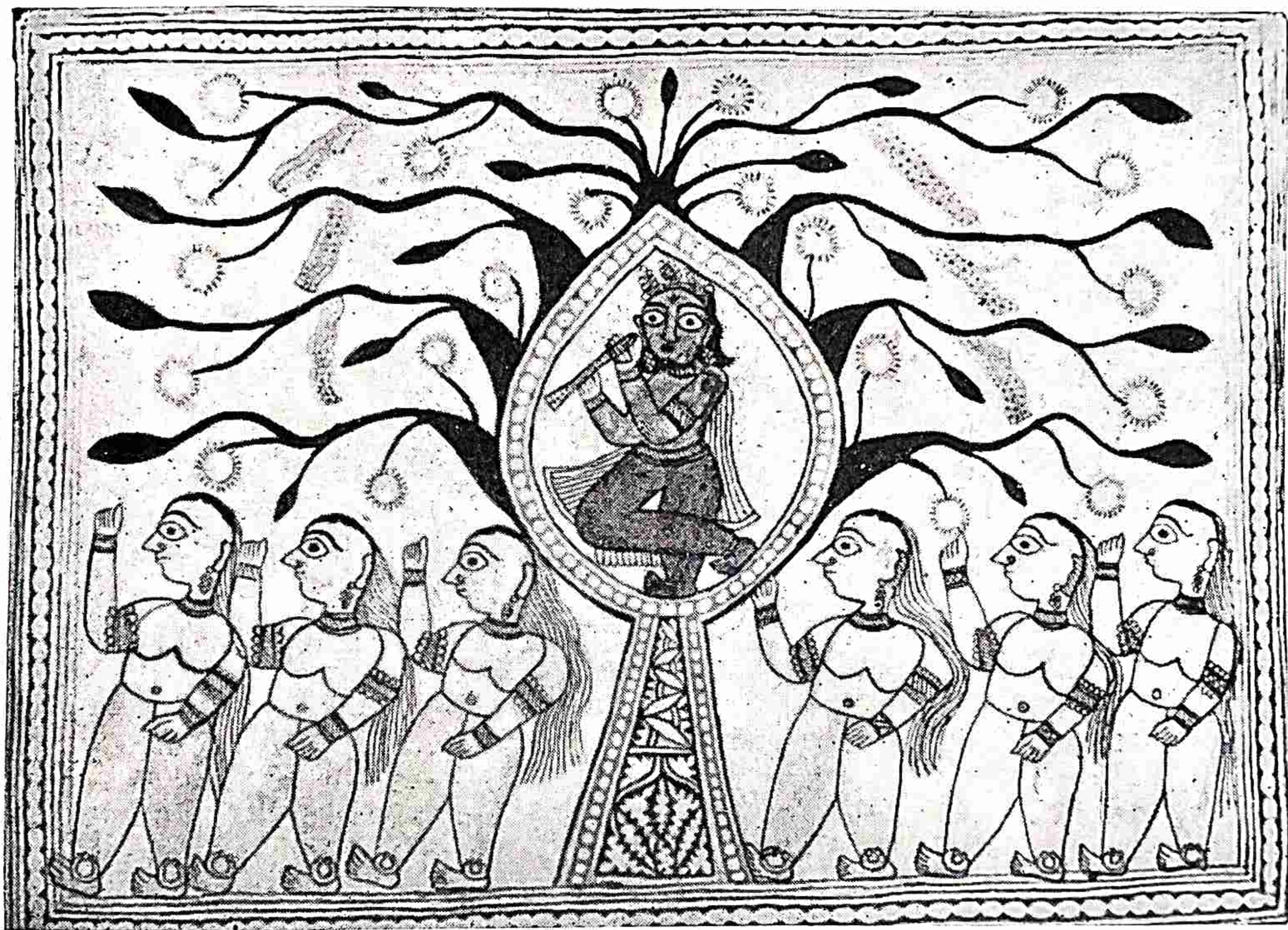


Fig. 2.
Kṛṣṇa with Gopīs.



Fig. 3.
Goddeess Durgā with her vāhana lion.



Fig. 4.
The figure of the ladies in dancing pose.



Fig. 5.
Figure of a couple riding on elephant with elephant-driver.

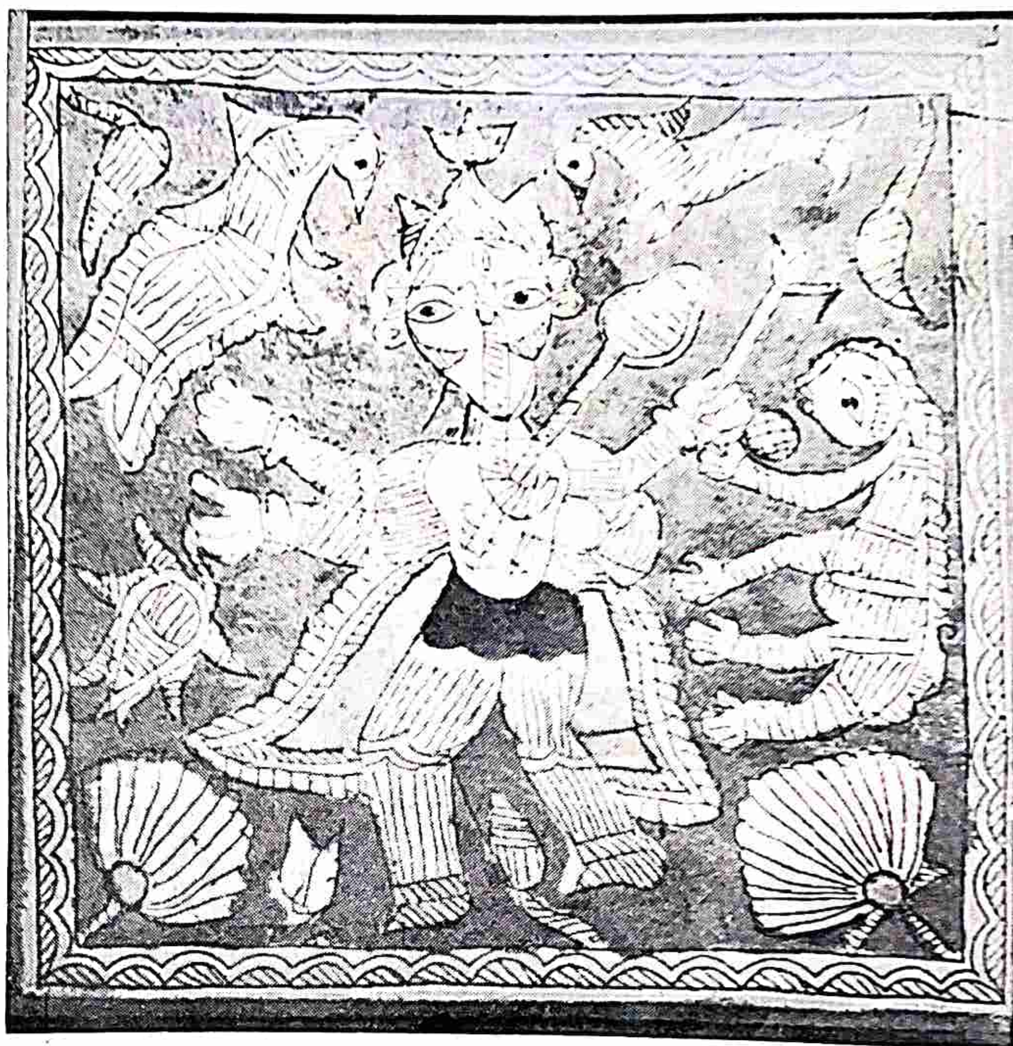


Fig. 6.
God Gaṇeśa or Vināyaka.
(Photograph of Pls. LI—LVI by Shri N. Sharma)

same idea. Sometimes folk women paints Śiva and Pārvatī in a amorous posture i. e. figure of Umā-Māheśvara in Āliṅgana posture. God Viṣṇu symbolises the idea of Lokapāla (लोकपाल), i. e. the preserver and maintainer of this universe. The figure of Viṣṇu represents the idea of house holder, enjoyment and work. The Goddess Lakṣmī, who is consort of Viṣṇu, represents earthly welfare, wealth and prosperty. She is the creative energy of God Viṣṇu. Saraśvatī, the patroness of speech, song and wisdom is also considered as consort of Viṣṇu and she is also related to Brahmā. Gaṇeśa or Vināyaka conveys the idea of auspiciousness (*Maṅgalakartā*) and worshipped for victory and success. He is the lord of master of obstacles (Vighneśvara). The figure of Kāma represents the concept of love, union, youth and desire and his consort Ratī (the Goddess of love) carries the idea of enjoyment. Durgā or Caṇḍī's figure repesents the embodied energy. The figure of Goddess Kālī, also called Kālarātrī[31] is connected with the Tāntrika form of worship. Kālī symbolises the idea of night (Aṅdhakāra) and destruction. The figure of the ten incarnatory[32] forms of Viṣṇu represent the origin and evolution of this universe.

Thus, all the above-mentioned Gods and Goddesses somehow or other inspired the life of new couple. This was the principle behind such religious figures which got prominent place in the 'Bhitti-citra' of the folk-women of Mithilā (or Bhojpurī areas) regions.

Besides all Gods and Godesses, the figure of brides and bridegroom and their attendants are also visible in these paintings (Fig. 1). In the second category, we can place various symbols of fertility and prosperity in the form of elephant (fig. 5), horse, fish (fig. 1), lion (fig. 3), parrot, turtles, Sun and Moon (fig. 1), bamboo (bāṁsa), bamboo tree, a great circuler lotus flowers and leaves (locally called puraina—fig. 1), pāna (betel). peacock, goose (Haṅśa), pālkī with kahāra (fig. 1), birds (fig. 1, 3, and 4) and different flowers and creepers (fig. 1 & 4), Swastika (स्वस्तिक), Saṅkha (conch-sell) etc. These figures have got their own significance. The elephant, horse or pālkī with kahāra together embody the sense of royalty

---

I. 1.). Gaurī image is represented in different forms and under different names such as Umā, Pārvatī, Tovala; Tripurā etc., Vastu-śāstra, Vol. II, pp. 319, 320.

31 *Indian Images*, Part I, p. 40. "The image of Kālarātrī might have evolved in the image of 'Sitalā' of modern age."

32 *Ibid.*, p. 13. "The ten incarnations of Viṣṇu are Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varāha (boar) Narasiṁha (Man-lion), Vāmana (drawf), Parasurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, Buddha, and Kalkī." Viṣṇudharmottara refers Kṛṣṇa and Trivikarama in place of Rāma and Balarāma.

same idea. Sometimes folk women paints Śiva and Pārvatī in a amorous posture i. e. figure of Umā-Māheśvara in Āliṅgana posture. God Viṣṇu symbolises the idea of Lokapāla (लोकपाल), i. e. the preserver and maintainer of this universe. The figure of Viṣṇu represents the idea of house holder, enjoyment and work. The Goddess Lakṣmī, who is consort of Viṣṇu, represents earthly welfare, wealth and prosperty. She is the creative energy of God Viṣṇu. Saraśvatī, the patroness of speech, song and wisdom is also considered as consort of Viṣṇu and she is also related to Brahmā. Gaṇeśa or Vināyaka conveys the idea of auspiciousness (*Maṅgalakartā*) and worshipped for victory and success. He is the lord of master of obstacles (Vighneśvara). The figure of Kāma represents the concept of love, union, youth and desire and his consort Ratī (the Goddess of love) carries the idea of enjoyment. Durgā or Caṇḍī's figure repesents the embodied energy. The figure of Goddess Kālī, also called Kālarātrī[31] is connected with the Tāntrika form of worship. Kālī symbolises the idea of night (Aṅdhakāra) and destruction. The figure of the ten incarnatory[32] forms of Viṣṇu represent the origin and evolution of this universe.

Thus, all the above-mentioned Gods and Goddesses somehow or other inspired the life of new couple. This was the principle behind such religious figures which got prominent place in the 'Bhitti-citra' of the folk-women of Mithilā (or Bhojpurī areas) regions.

Besides all Gods and Godesses, the figure of brides and bridegroom and their attendants are also visible in these paintings (Fig. 1). In the second category, we can place various symbols of fertility and prosperity in the form of elephant (fig. 5), horse, fish (fig. 1), lion (fig. 3), parrot, turtles, Sun and Moon (fig. 1), bamboo (bāṅsa), bamboo tree, a great circuler lotus flowers and leaves (locally called puraina—fig. 1), pāna (betel). peacock, goose (Haṅśa), pālkī with kahāra (fig. 1), birds (fig. 1, 3, and 4) and different flowers and creepers (fig. 1 & 4), Swastika (स्वस्तिक), Saṅkha (conch-sell) etc. These figures have got their own significance. The elephant, horse or pālkī with kahāra together embody the sense of royalty

---

I. 1.). Gaurī image is represented in different forms and under different names such as Umā, Pārvatī, Tovala; Tripurā etc., Vastu-śāstra, Vol. II, pp. 319, 320.

31 *Indian Images*, Part I, p. 40. "The image of Kālarātrī might have evolved in the image of 'Sitalā' of modern age."

32 *Ibid.*, p. 13. "The ten incarnations of Viṣṇu are Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varāha (boar) Narasiṁha (Man-lion), Vāmana (drawf), Parasurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, Buddha, and Kalkī." Viṣṇudharmottara refers Kṛṣṇa and Trivikarama in place of Rāma and Balarāma.

and richness. The Sun and the Moon represent the idea of long life (Dīrgha-Jīvana), goose and peacock are symbol of welfare and peace. Pāna and lotus represent for Śubha-lakṣaṇa (शुभ-लक्षण). Bāṁsa (bamboo) is meant for future progeny (Vaṁśa-vṛddhi).

In Maithilī and Bhojpurī speaking area, the outer wall of kohabara-ghara is full of paintings, which are the scenes from rural life, pālkī with kahāra, stylized fruit trees, mango, banana, dancing peacock, love scene of Lord Kṛṣṇa and Gopīs etc. Thus we find, that folk painting of Mithilā done by folk-women relates to animal and bird motifs with the ideas of welfare (Maṅgala-kāmanā) and happiness. The other aspects of these paintings are our agricultural animal life which play an important role because the beasts are the symbol of happiness and backbone of our agricultural life. These folk-paintings of Mithilā, as hoped, bring good fortune to the young couple and bless them with children. Hence to paint the walls of the houses is a common act by the women of the families in this region. Some gains reputation for the skill and takes the lead in sketching the outlines of the designs on carefully prepared mud walls.

As regards the origin of these 'Bhitti-citra' none can say that when this folk-art began. But the symbolic representation of these are very much similar to the designs of Harappan potteries and motifs on Punch-marked coins. Thus, this folk-art, is handed down from the hoary past. There is a custom in Mithilā region that after the completion of the marriage the bride carries the paper patterns of these paintings (which are suposed to be the 'aide-memories') to her husband's home, where she will re-inforce the designs already current.

In short, we can say that in these 'Bhitti-citra', the theme (bhāvanā) is more dominant than the delicacy of lines (rekhā) and colours. They are plain and simple and carries the pious religious as well as retualistic sentiments of the human beings. These paintings are not bound by the rigid rules and regulations and have specified codes. But the artists express their feeling without least hesitation. So these Bhitti-citras are more realistic, subjective and dominated by human feelings. In other words these Maithilī Kohabara paintings have varieties and inventiveness which make them most sophisticated and popular one.

ARIPANA

The folk-women of Mithilā area knew the art of Alpanā or line drawing on the floor of the house. This is very famous folk-art in almost all the states of India. It has different nomenclatures according to the different region, such as Alpanā (अल्पना) in Bengal, Māṇḍalā (माण्डला)

in Rajasthan, Rangolī (रंगोली) in Gujrat, and 'Chauka-puranā (चौक-पूरना) in Bhojpurī area of eastern U. P. and Bihar (South-Bihar), and Aripana[33] in Mithilā region (North-Bihar). This is one of the appealing branches of folk-art which still lives with all its traditions. In canonical literature such as Gṛhyasuttra and the commentaries, the word Maṇḍala (मण्डल) has been used for Aripana or Alpanā. In Brahma-purāṇa[34] the word 'Bhūmi-Śobhā' has been used for Aripana. In Naisadha-carita[35] the word Ālepana (आलेपन) is used. Hence, it becomes clear that the word Aripana is a corrupt form of Ālepana. This Aripana is drawn on the auspicious occasions either Pujā, Parva, Brata or at the time of different Saṁskāras.

According to Ray,[36] "the purpose of this Aripana line drawing on the floor was originally the cultivated land fertile and fruitful by magical performances. Primitive women were inspired to draw a city or a field in Alpanā, for their own benefit and subsistence and not merely for artistic decorations. At present in Rajasthan, Alpanā are still drawn to depict cities protected by walls and cultivated lands with irrigation channels indicated by water-marks in between the alis (Alpanā)." It is clear that Mr. Ray's contention behind the purpose of this Aripana is to conceive it as work of fertility and that too by magical performance. But on the basis of studies of different designs of Aripana, I have come to this conclusion that the main purpose behind these line drawings on the floor was just to apart the pure and dirty one, because most of the Aripanas have got religious background.

The material which is used for Ālepana is powdered rice made into paste with water. This paste is called '*Piṭhāra*'. Here the drawing is made by means of fingers. Sometimes Sindura (Vermilion) is also applied in it. These various aripana-designs are painted with white, red, green, yellow

33 *The Bratas of Bengal*, pp. 42 and 44.
(a) "As a matter of fact Alpanā or ali-pana, is an indigenous (Deshaja) word meaning the "Art" of drawing ali (embankment or wall).
(b) The derivation of Alpanā or ali-pana from Ālimpana or ālepana of Sanskrit origin appears to be grammatically right but falsifies the real origin of the word (foot note p. 44).
(c) *Memoirs of Arch. S. I.* No. 73, p. 97. "The Kāṅgolī or alpanā; kolam or muggy as it is known in Bombay; Bangal, Tamiland and Andhra is a pleasing decoration of the ground. Rāṅgolī is a currupt form of rangavalli and is the same as the Dhūlicitra described in the Nāradaśilpa."

34 *Brah. Pur.* 18—12.
35 *Naish. Ch.* II—26.
36 *Brt. of Bengal*, pp. 42 and 44.

and black colours. The line drawing on the floor can visualise many different shapes and forms. The outline of aripana has got Tāntrika influences and inner features reflect the Śākta-creed. For example, the red point shows prominence of mother Goddess and three inner triangles refer to Gaurī or Pārvatī (the consort of Lord Śiva).

The subject-matter of these 'Bhūmi-Śobhā' is to represent the effigy of human beings, figures of birds and animals along with natural phenomena. The different and diverse objects are represented such as flower, (lotus), leaves, various trees and fruits, fish, peacock and snake (Śeṣa-nāga, the serpents endless representative of cosmic waters, who is the source of all waters). The folk-women also draw the religious figures of Gods and Goddesses namely as Śiva, Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu, Lakṣmī etc. in Aripana on different auspicious occasions. There are other articles too, which are used in worship of the deities. The footprints of Lord Viṣṇu, lamp, conch-shell (शंख), trident (Triśūla), Vindus (points), Swastika (Saḍa-cakra), mountain (meru), rivers and other symbols also occupy the important place in the line drawings on the floor.

If one minutely examines the different shapes of aripana, several geometrical shapes mainly triangle, rectangle, circle and other typical shapes appear in the folk paintings on the floor. Among the different lines drawn on the floor at different festive occasions the prominent are grouped as follows :

The 'Tusārī-Pujā'[37] is meant for having a good bride-groom. It is performed from the month of 'Makara-Saṁkrānti' to Fālguṇa-Saṁkrānti. At the end of the Brata, the folk-women draw aripana where a temple, moon, sun, navagraha are depicted. The 'Sānjha-aripana' is for worship of 'Sandhyādevī'. Here the whole Brahmāṇḍa (ब्रह्माण्ड) is reflected in the form of temple.

"Kalyāṇadaī-aripana" is a floor decoration, which is drawn in favour of Goddess of welfare (locally called Kalyāṇdaī), and the symbols of sun, moon, maṭha, Gaurī, Navagraha are visible. In 'Dasapāta-aripana'

37 The young maidens performed a Pujā, which is locally known as 'Hari-saun-pujā'. This pujā is celebrated by the girl till her marriage for getting good bridegroom which is described in *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* in following lines—

"सर्वव्रतविधानज्ञमत्तो वत्सनिशामय,

ख्यातं गौरी व्रतं नाम मार्गे मासि कृतं महत्॥

On this occasion the girl usually made paintings on the wall of their home, which is called " Hari Saun-Pujā-Ka-Citra" (a kind of cosmic ship).

We have the designs of lotus flower (locally called puraina-kā-phūla). The upper lotus flower represents Trinity, below that the lotus with five petals refers to 'Pañca-deva', and other having seven petals represents 'Sapta-ṛṣi'. "ṣaṣṭhi-pujā-aripana" is drawn on the floor when the young maidens become rajaśvalā (age of purity). The aripana of this occasion symbolises the creation and destruction of this universe. The "Gahā-Saṅkrāntī-aripana" refers to birth (janma) and death (mṛtyu) of human being, so that people may not forget the duty in their lives. The "Kojagarā-aripana" (using the makhānā) performed on the full moon day (festival in the month of September), is just to welcome Lakṣmī,[38] the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. The same Goddess of wealth is welcomed in "Dipāvalī-aripana" which is also called 'Sukha-rātrī-kā-aripana' in Mithilā region. "Swastika-aripana" is meant for blessings to the younger ones. Besides these drawings, there are many other occasions, when the floor of the house is decorated by house-wives (Bhūmi-Śobhā).

This aripana of Mithilā region is also in vogue in Bhojpurī area of south-Bihar and locally called "Chuaka-puranā". It is very simple, plain and devoid of ornamentation. It is mainly drawn by the folk-people, male or female who are barber by caste (Nāyī). This is prepared by means of powdered rice or wheat flour. In such aripana we find some geometrical shapes (circle, angle, triangle, rectangle etc). The lines are rough and colour composition has got minor importance.

Thus, the aripana of Mithilā is more superior in decorative aspect than the floor-paintings of Bhojpurī area. This aripana is a temporary phase as it lasts for a few hours. It is one of the attractive work when the young Hindū maidens exercise their talents and attains a particular delicacy. Hence, in brief, we can describe the aripana (i.e. ground decoration) of Mithilā region as cosmic in significance and playful in expression. The youngsters (folk-girls) on auspicious occasions try to express their collective imagination and group fancy. In these aripanas, we see the reflection of delicate mind and desires of our folk-women. In them, the complex and gay are in union. We find communication among participants where only the fingers can be felt by strangers.

---

38 *Bratas of Bnengol*, p. 43.

(a) "In Bengal, an Alpanā of Lakṣmī Varta has got same idea as in "Kojagarā-ka-aripana" of Mithilā. The figure 1 shows the design of alpanā related to Lakṣmī Varta."

(b) *Myths and symbols in Indian art and Civilization*, p. 100.
"Lakṣmī is the universal mother of life in her benevolent life—bestowing, life-increasing aspeet."

In short, it may be stated that the folk arts have certain distinct characteristics of their own. It calls for great sensitivity, patience and service before results are produced. They really speak of an age whose dignity lay in silence. They reveal the creative urge of the folk-community and disclose the esthetic sense. These paintings have embodied the accumulated experience handed down traditionally from mothers to daughters and grand daughters. These traditional folk paintings, whether it is 'Bhumi-Sobha' or 'Bhitti-Chitra', all perfectly reveal our ancient concept of "Satyam Shivam Sundaram" (सत्यम् शिवम् सुन्दरम्).

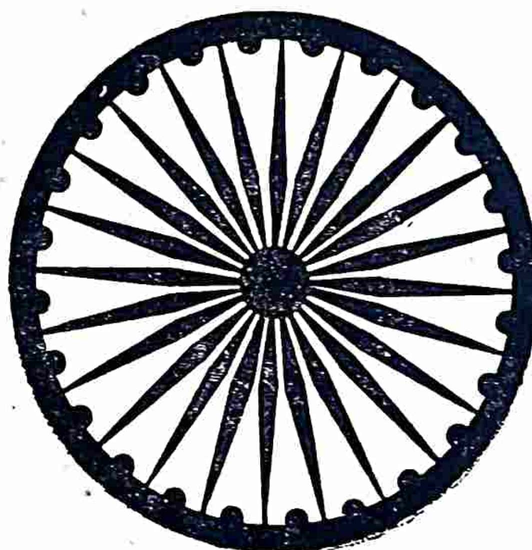
They are our precious legacy and valuable part of our heritage. They are now in decadent stage due to the want of taste in decoration and diminishing due to the modernization of society. Hence, our first and foremost duty is to preserve or protect these precious and cultural heritage of our motherland.

THE JOURNAL
OF
THE BIHAR RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOL. LIV JANUARY—DECEMBER, 1968 PARTS I-IV

CHIEF EDITOR

Dr. S. V. Sohoni, M. A., I. C. S., Vidyāvācaspati



PUBLISHED BY

THE BIHAR RESEARCH SOCIETY, PATNA

Price Rs. 20/-